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ABSTRACT

Epideictic rhetoric, expression of praise or blame, animates much communication, from gossip to sermons, from commercial ads to love letters. Even when writing for purposes other than to judge, writers often frame their talk with implicit or explicit expressions of praise for individuals or groups or ideas considered "good." Epideictic rhetoric is an especially rich area of study for those who teach college students persuasion and argumentation. Students at the University of Iowa, mostly first-year students, produce simple persuasive speeches or essays that, as economia, use praise to persuade. The rhetorical projects require that a student choose a person he or she knows and admires and, in a hypothetical context, nominate that person for a public honor. In these exercises, epideictic rhetoric links highly personal expression with public persuasion. What is originally a kind of personal expression is transformed into a public nomination speech, a form of writing that gives due consideration to audience. Students instinctively use rhetorical devices without being aware of the Aristotelian label for them. Later, students learn how their own speeches reflect some of Aristotle's concepts; they study a communication triangle intended to reflect Aristotle's theories. Teachers can empower their students to use epideictic discourse first to judge the discourse of praise and blame and then to celebrate redeemable human qualities. (Contains 3 figures.) (TB)

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Epideictic Discourse as a Bridge to Argumentation: A Rhetorically Based Strategy for Teaching the Arts of Persuasion

ED 402 630

"Epideictic" rhetoric, expression of praise and blame, animates much communication--from gossip to sermons, from commercial ads to love letters, from talk shows to political speeches. Even when we speak or write for other purposes than to judge, we often frame our talk with implicit or explicit expressions of praise for individuals or groups or ideas considered "good," that is, strong or beautiful or honorable. Similarly, we express or imply contempt for what we consider weak, bad, or mediocre. Although ubiquitous, the *epideictic* bent of human discourse, with its evaluative coloration, has received relatively little attention in the modern academy. In my brief presentation, I focus on *epideictic* discourse as an especially rich area of study for those of us who teach college students persuasion and argumentation. In *epideictic* discourse, the *topoi* of praise and blame, virtue and vice, the honorable and shameful link persuasion to the cultural beliefs upon which persuasion ultimately rests. *Epideictic* manifests the common values that support effective persuasion. [1]

Here, I describe how my students at the University of Iowa, mostly first-year students, approach persuasion through *epideictic* rhetoric, simple persuasive speeches and essays that, as encomia, use praise to persuade. The rhetorical projects are simple: a student chooses a person he or she knows and admires and, in a hypothetical context, nominates that person for a public honor. For example, one student, I'll call her Amy, has nominated her algebra teacher to be honored by the local school board as the High School Teacher of the Year. Another student nominated his mother for local office. Other students chose to write essays nominating their parents as the University of Iowa's Mom or Dad of the Year.

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[1] For theoretical background, see especially "Epideictic, Ethos, & Educators" by Donovan Ochs, in *Rhetoric, Cultural Studies, and Literacy*, 1995; "The Practical Celebration of Epideictic" by Lawrence Rosenfield, in *Rhetoric in Transition*, 1980.

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In these compositions, *epideictic* rhetoric links highly personal expression with public persuasion, thus linking expressive with persuasive composition and filling a gap that flaws some college curricula and denies the full benefits of rhetorical education.

During the 1980s, researchers--including the National Assessment of Educational Progress--focused on writing in America's high schools to confirm what many of us have observed, that most students write narrative and personal expressive essays with greater facility than analytic and persuasive essays. By using epideictic discourse, college teachers can build upon students' strengths at personal expressive composition while introducing them to persuasion and argumentation.

In Iowa's Rhetoric program, as with many college composition programs, students begin by writing about their personal experiences for their classmates and graduate instructor. Borrowing freely from the work of Lou Kelley, former director of Iowa's Writing Lab, I ask students to write about family and home town as sources of their values, all the while asking students to develop their work with concrete details that convey major ideas implicitly. Ineluctably, students intimate praise or blame for their subjects. Eventually, I ask them to "sketch" a person that they know well: Grandma in her garden, Dad fishing, Mr. G. teaching algebra. With this sketch, I ask the students to play a kind of writer's game, to show us the kind of person their subject is without telling us. Instead of authorial comments--"Grandma had a heart of gold"--students provide a glimpse of their subjects including the person's words and deeds to convey his or her character. To the extent that the writer succeeds in "sketching" her subject's character in this way, her personal composition becomes *epideictic* rhetoric.

Thus having tricked my young writers into performing an act of *epideictic* rhetoric and enjoying it, as is often the case, I prepare them to compose and deliver their nomination speeches or essays. I coach students about important aspects of the rhetorical situation, most importantly, that their messages should be tailored to their audience and purpose. So,

after the students identify their nominees and the organizations that will honor them, each student writes a couple paragraphs about the organization he or she will address--again, hypothetically--and explains why that organization sponsors (or might sponsor) the public awards ceremony. Some students struggle with this informal audience analysis, in part because some have written little outside the classroom and seldom for adults other than teachers. So, in small groups, students read and discuss each other's preliminary descriptions of their audiences before developing their analyses further.

As students draft their nomination addresses while considering audience, we avoid the academic jargon of persuasion and argumentation. Rather, following the approach of Walter R. Fischer ("Toward a Logic of Good Reasons," *QJS* 1978) and Karl R. Wallace ("The Substance of Rhetoric: Good Reasons," *QJS* 1963), I merely ask students to give "good reasons" for honoring the nominee, that is, reasons that the student as well as the audience, with their values and motives, would consider strong. As she analyzes her audience, Amy finds the "good reasons" to offer in her nomination speech:

figure one: audience analysis / "good reasons"

Audience analysis: "I would like to nominate Mr. G., my former math teacher, for the Anamosa Senior High School Teacher of the Year." My audience, the School Board--two women, the rest men--are mostly middle-aged. "All members are avid community volunteers" with careers in business, medicine, and education. All have spouses and children. Most are practicing Christians.

Good reasons in the speech:

1. "for thirty years . . . loyal and devoted to the district"
2. "in his room from 6:30 A.M. till 4:30 . . . for students who need help with math or personal problems"
3. a family man who "volunteers at the local Salvation Army, works with children with learning disabilities, and preaches at a local Christian church"
4. "I graduated top honors in 1995. I thank Mr. G. for my success . He has been my mentor, tutor, and friend."

Amy's three-minute nomination speech was very effective, in my view, largely because she selected "good reasons," or strong arguments for honoring her algebra teacher, persuading with praise in terms apt to move her hypothetical audience, the local school board.

During class, we reviewed none of the traditional *epideictic* topics, none of the commonplaces for encomium detailed in traditional rhetorical handbooks; the students, responding to the rhetorical situations that they imagined, found some of those rhetorical topics naturally. For example, Amy magnifies the contributions of her algebra teacher by noting that he was "loyal and devoted" to his school district for thirty years. She thus enlists the common rhetorical topic of the greater and the lesser: "the longer one does good work, the better." She similarly recognizes Mr. G's ten-hour days.

Amy chose to recall Mr. G's preaching in church and his volunteer work with the Salvation Army and disabled children. In so doing, she engages the Aristotelean topic of the "honorable deed" as unpaid service to others, as benefitting the doer "more after death than during life" (references to Aristotle's theory are to his *Art of Rhetoric*, ed. George Kennedy, 1990). She praises her teacher's volunteer activities because they would influence the school board, "all" of whom are volunteers, most of whom are practicing Christians.

In her audience analysis, Amy remarks that the school board will give Mr. G. favorable consideration because "he fits the description of the typical school board member." Our rhetorical exercise, then, led Amy to recognize a problem inherent in *epideictic* more than in other persuasive discourse: the circularity of argument based on value judgments, "for any evaluative system is circular," writes Fischer. In this vein, Aristotle recommends a disingenuous strategy: "Whatever the quality an audience esteems, the speaker must attribute that quality to the object of his praise." Indeed, the gadfly Socrates supposedly said, "It is not difficult to praise Athenians before an audience of Athenians." In the modern American classroom, *epideictic*, ideally conceived as a rhetoric of identification and inclusion, can promote indoctrination and exclusion. I'll return to this problem at the end of my essay.

Now, I'll briefly describe how these nomination speeches can help students to analyze fundamental elements of persuasion. With the communication triangle first described by Aristotle, students can see how their own speeches employ the basic rhetorical dynamics of all persuasion.

figure two (overhead): communication triangle

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subject / nominee

(Logos)

MESSAGE

GOOD REASONS

speaker / nominator **audience / judges**

(Ethos) **(Pathos)**

(shared values)

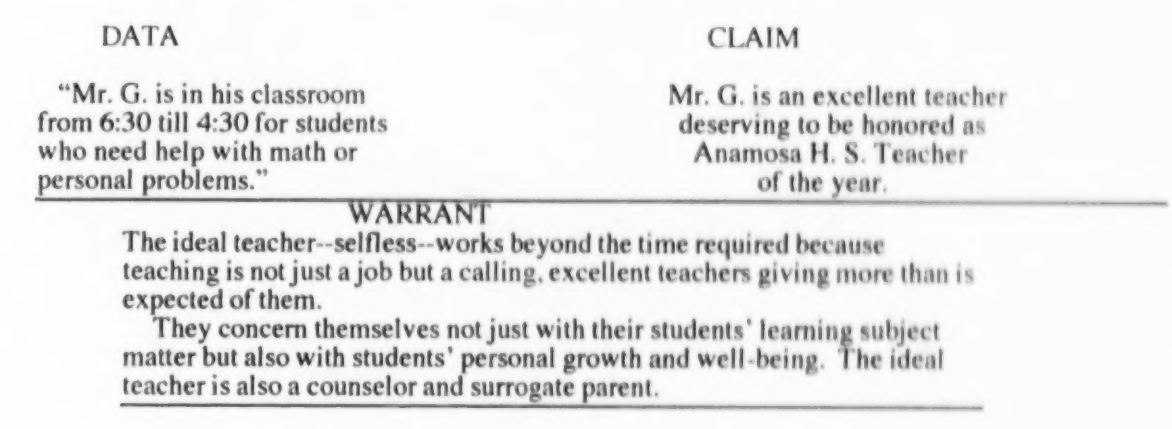
Adapted by James Kinnaevy in his *Theory of Discourse*, Aristotle's communication triangle illustrates the dynamics of rhetorical persuasion. When Amy recalls that Mr. G. helps students with "math or personal problems," she recalls his humanity and perhaps arouses feelings in her hearers, feelings linked to common parental concern. Such appeals to audience emotion Aristotle described under the Greek term *pathos*. Especially after completing their audience analyses, students very readily see how writers and speakers, when composing *epideictic*, naturally appeal to the audience's feelings. In a more important application of the communication triangle to our ceremonial speeches, we can use it to illustrate that the *ethos* of a speaker or writer--her perceived character and credibility--can persuade the audience. When Amy reminds her schoolboard that she "graduated with top honors in 1995," she not only establishes her character as a hard-working student and

her credibility to judge her high-school faculty, but she also presents herself as evidence of Mr. G.'s success: "I thank Mr. G. for my success. He has been my mentor, tutor, and friend." Concluding with these remarks, Amy reasserts her character, stirs humane feeling in her audience, and gives them another good reason to honor Mr. G.

I have added a foundation to Aristotle's communication triangle, the values shared by speaker, subject, and audience as the foundation of persuasion. In their modern redefinition of persuasion as evaluative discourse, Wallace and Fischer emphasize that most argument, that is, most "good reasons" can be assessed in terms of the cultural values from which rhetoric, along with ethical and moral principles, arises.

So far, so good. Students seem to like this manner of rhetorical analysis. Our modern version of the communication triangle, when applied to their nominations, helps them to understand fundamental dynamics of persuasion, helps them shape their personal writing into persuasion tailored to an audience. But when I took our rhetorical analysis one further step to analyze individual arguments according to the Toulmin model, students seemed to balk, even though Toulmin uses minimal jargon.

figure three: Toulmin model of argument



As you see, the Toulmin method helps to make implicit assumptions explicit. By reviewing their own nomination speeches to find the data and warrants supporting their claim that their nominees stand as ideal teachers, moms, or athletes, college students can see the common values animating their speeches and much other persuasive discourse.

More than any other rhetoric, *epideictic* is ambi-potent: it can either unite or fracture, join or sunder. Ideally, *epideictic* promotes identification and inclusion by celebrating cultural values that hold a community together, but by defining values too narrowly *epideictic* discourse can also promote division and exclusion. As teachers we can empower our students first to judge the discourse of praise and blame with a critical ear, then to use *epideictic* to identify and celebrate those human qualities that communities should cultivate. After students compose their nomination speeches, I have them listen to and discuss a number of other *epideictic* pieces: I present my students with a videotape of Nancy Glaser's speech, "AIDS: A Personal Story," or Martin Luther King's "I Have A Dream" as examples of *epideictic* discourse that mix praise with blame to advocate the interests of marginalized groups. Similarly, one could show Mr. Pat Buchanan's "Culture Wars" speech or Governor George Wallace's 1964 inaugural address as examples of *epideictic* rhetoric advocating division. Such study provides a rich basis for examining almost all rhetorical discourse and the values that subtend it.

I conclude my brief essay with a small bit of *epideictic* discourse by thanking Don Ochs, the University of Iowa's professor of classical rhetoric, now retired after teaching thousands of college students and showing his graduate students that the rhetorical theory of the ancients provides us teachers with rich veins of inquiry. Don also acted as fishing guide when he took my two children--Darcie, then 6, and John, then 5--to catch their first fish in the pond near his home.

Thank you , Don.